

Hegemonic Signification in Photograph

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Abstract

The present paper attempted to distinguish certain hegemonic strategies of encoding for depicting «the people» in the photography of the public space of communication during the Stalinist period. These were, on the one hand, photographs that had acquired the status of an icon in the public space; and on the other, the internal principles of construction of these «iconic» photographs, for which the following means of encoding were distinguished: 1) the dominant text as the dominant element of the process of signification depicted in the photograph; 2) code-text as the principle of organization of the mutual relationships between elements depicted in the photograph. It seems that the Soviet public *scopic* regime is characteristic of the type of culture that Lotman has characterized as a collection of texts, as opposed to the type of culture that creates the collection of texts (Lotman; Uspenskij 1994, 245). In this type of culture, the content of the culture is pre-given with respect to the selfunderstanding of that culture, it consists of the sum of normalized, «correct» texts: «iconic photographs» that have been encoded according to a unitary canon.

The present paper tackles the questions that can be briefly formulated as follows: 1) how to visualise power? and 2) does semiotics have anything to offer to research on the visualisation processes of power? One of the means by which power relations are established and reproduced in societies is photographs. The issue of the visualization of power has been dealt with before. Reference can be made to Mihai Nadin and Richard Zakiiaia (2004), Gunther Gress and Theo van Leeuwen (1996), as well as Roland Barthes (1972), all of whom have considered the representations of power in photography from a semiotic aspect. The works of Walter Benjamin (1963) and Susan Sontag (2001) are the classics on the construction of social «reality» in photography. Harold Lasswell (1927), Jacques Ellul (1965) and others have written about the relations between propaganda and photography. Among Estonian authors, note should be made of Peeter Linnap, who has studied the visualisation of power and politics in contemporary history (2000, 219-252).

Despite this abundance of different treatments, the question: what is power and how is it expressed in photographs, remains mostly under-theorized in all of these works. The reply usually provided is circular, i.e. analysis focuses on the representations of things already considered as power (e.g. the self-presentations of persons in power) and proceeds from the classic definitions of propaganda power as manipulative force applied for the purpose of making the receiver behave according to the will of the sender (Lasswell 1995, 13-25; Haste 1995, 105-136). This means, however, that the deeper issue of the internal logic of the signification processes of power itself remains unquestioned.

The approach developed in the present paper proceeds from the tradition that has evolved from Antonio Gramsci's theory of hegemony and Michel Foucault's treatment of power. For these authors, power relations are not something pre-given, but are constructed through social significations. In addition to the prohibitive function, power always has a creative function, i.e. power produces discourses that generate meaning, to use Foucault's way of putting it. According to Laclau, it is only at the level of discourse that any sense is rendered to hegemony. For Laclau, discourse is the primary terrain of objectivity as such. Nothing is constituted outside discourse. So the problem of the constitution of social and political reality becomes, for Laclau, the problem of the *constitution of discourse*. Hegemonic relation is thus a certain articulation of meanings (Laclau 2006, p. 114) The present purpose is to inquire whether power relations in photography conceived in this manner constitute a particular kind of means for signification, and if they do, what is its internal logic.

In the theoretical part of the paper I will attempt to integrate the starting points of visual rhetoric and Roland Barthes ideas, the theory of hegemony by Ernesto Laclau and the semiotics of culture approach of the Tartu-Moscow school, especially that of Yuri Lotman.

1. «PEOPLE» AS HEGEMONIC PROCESS OF SIGNIFICATION

The present paper focuses on distinguishing different strategies by means of which «the people» as a homogenous entity is constructed in photographs. I will proceed from the treatment of «the folk» by American anthropologist Alan Dundes and concept of «the people» by discourse theorist Ernesto Laclau.

According to Dundes, the concept of «the folk» can signify any group of people who share at least one *common* characteristic. What this connective characteristic is, is irrelevant — it may be a common vocation, language, religion; what is important is that this group, whatever the reason for which it formed, should share some traditions that they would consider as their own (Dundes 1977). An identification with something that is «the same» does not comprise a relationship of identity, but of equivalence. It is a relationship of similarity that in its turn defines the group from others who do not share in these similarities.

Although Dundes treats the identity of «the people» as constructed, his definition of «the people» remains simplified and under-theorized. In particular, Dundes fails to consider the situation where one *common* and *shared* characteristic begins to dominate.

For Laclau, it is precisely these aspects of the process by which «the people» is constructed that are the most relevant: The operation that constructs «the people» is, for Laclau, the result of the logic of a hegemonic process of signification.. This articulation requires that a particular difference loses its particularity and becomes a universal representative of the signifying system as a whole. That way a *closure* for that system is provided. Since every system of signification is essentially *differential*, its *closure* is the precondition of signification being possible *at all*. According to Laclau, the role of something like an anchor point is attributed to *some* components of the equivalence in the process of constructing «the people», which will then differentiate them from one another. These anchor points- empty signifiers - that will begin to signify the chain of equivalence as unity and whole.

The relationship between the empty signifier and the discourse as a *totality* is the relationship between a *name* and an object (Laclau 2006: 109). The unity or identity of the object is the result of *naming* it. Objects are (so to speak) *created* through naming. This is similar to Lotman's semiotic concept of naming. As soon as the *outside* world (and that can also be a world that is coded in some *other* language) is set forth, it is also *named*, in other words: it is semiotized at least on the surface level (Lotman 2004f: 646).

To define «the people» in this manner distances it from the modernist conception of identity, according to which identity is something stable and homogenous, consistent and ordered. Rather, this approach departs from a contrary way of defining identity — identities are dispersed, a single individual has many, often contradictory identities, identities are no longer temporally as stable and they are open to changes and dynamics. Identity is not, therefore, an essential quality, a substantial phenomenon, but a project and a postulate (Baumann 1996, 18-36). In what follows, let us see how «the people» as an empty signifier is constructed in photography by an act of visual naming.

2.1. STRATEGIES FOR CONSTRUCTING «THE PEOPLE» IN PHOTOGRAPHY: VISUAL NAMING

Visual rhetoric, which has become increasingly prevalent in recent years, attempts to apply the instruments of rhetoric to the analysis of visual images, and as such encompasses a wide variety of objects, from architecture to the presentation of interiors and public spaces (Defining Visual Rhetoric 2004; Blair 1999; Foss 1994; Twigg 1992; Stafford 1999). The concept of «iconic

photographs», derived from this approach, is relevant for the present discussion. The concept refers to those photographs that, within a particular society (culture): 1) are recognised by everyone (they have acquired iconic status); 2) are understood to be representations of historically significant events; 3) are the objects of emotional identification for the members of the society and 4) are regularly reproduced and republished by the media (Hariman; Lucaites 2001). In principle, these photographs establish a hegemonic relationship for constructing and representing historical events. This means that those images, words, and so on through which they are recognized, which give successive concrete contents a sense of temporal continuity, function exactly as what Laclau has called empty signifiers (Laclau 2005, 76). It is through them that the discourse of «historical reality» is constructed, where some points of view, presented by means of photographs (a parallel may be drawn with the eye of the camera) function as documents of what really happened, and others — those not represented on the photographs — are declared nonexistent. For this reason such «founding events» are always violent with respect to individual memories, since they subordinate the possibilities for individual interpretation (Ricoeur 2004, 79). This is further amplified by the widespread perception of photography as a impartial reflection of reality.

In his works that address photography, Roland Barthes has written that images do not say, they refer (Barthes 1974, 62). Through them, we *recognize* meaningfulness, but rather than present an *accurate description* of reality, or to reveal «the truth», images ensemble and arrange new «meaningful blocks», and these visual ensembles are rhetorical acts (Helmers; Hill 2004, 1-25). In «The Semiotics of Cinema», Lotman writes that «conventional signs are capable of *telling*, of creating narrative texts, while iconic signs are restricted to the function of *naming*» (Lotman 1976, 7). This means that a particular photograph first indicates what is depicted in the photo as a meaning-bearing continuous text, that is, it *names* its significance during the first act of recognition (or *refers* to meaningfulness in Barthes's sense), but does not yet subdivide it into different discrete meaningful structures. Such a process of reference is in fact the logic of equivalence with respect to the specific hegemonic content, the prevalence of continuous encoding over discrete encoding.

The Soviet Estonian media provides numerous examples of such hegemonic empty signifiers that take the form of photographs. One of the more famous ones is a photograph taken of the balcony of the embassy of the Soviet Union in Tallinn, from 20 June 1940, depicting Zhdanov, Lauristin, Ruus, Säre and others who arranged the coup d'état, waving to the «working people» (Photo 1). In the Soviet public space of communication, this photograph began to represent an entire sequence of events both prior to and after the depicted moment: «the proletarian revolution», the people's support of the new socialist government and the anger targeted at the former government that harboured nationalist sentiments, the friendship of the workers with the Soviet Union, etc. As a particular temporal and spatial snapshot, a particular content in Laclau's terminology, it is drained of its concreteness and becomes a signifier for the entire discourse, or rather, constructs this discourse during the act of *visual naming*. It is clear that if a different photograph, one *without* comrade Zhdanov, would have acquired the status of an «iconic photograph», an entirely different discourse would have been constructed on its basis, a different «founding event of history», whose chain of equivalence would have been formed between entirely different particular contents.

It is important, however, to emphasize in light of the fundamental distinction between discrete and continuous languages, that «the worlds of iconic and conventional signs do not simply co-exist, they are in constant interaction, in continual mutual crossover and repulsion» (Lotman 1976, 7). This means that the dividing line between discrete and continuous languages is itself mobile and depends, among other things, on the level of analysis the researcher has chosen — we receive the visual image as a whole, but during analysis we can subdivide it into different constitutive elements, and vice versa — by studying the discrete encoding of the verbal text on the level of the signifier, we can focus on those continuous rules that construct the text as a whole out of these discrete elements. «There is an immediate, direct link between attempts to transform graphic signs into verbal signs and narration as the fundamental principle of text construction» (Lotman 1976, 8).

In what follows I will attempt to disentangle the internal principles of encoding of these «iconic» photographs (as text or discourse) that would characterise photography during the Stalinist period.

2.2. STRATEGIES FOR CONSTRUCTING «THE PEOPLE» IN PHOTOGRAPHY: DOMINANT TEXT

One of the direct consequences of the intersection of different texts are cases where the invading text *subordinates* the prospects of the earlier text to generate new meanings. Here there are several possibilities: first, the prior texts are removed from the public space of communication. During the period under discussion, this was a widespread practice that could take on different forms: censorship, closed archives, physical destruction of the photos, etc.

From the semiotic perspective, the following possibilities are more interesting. The typical consequence of an invasion of an alien text is «text-in-text», in which case the text takes on a series of functions: to be a catalyst for meaning, to change the character of primary signification, to remain unnoticed (Lotman 2004c, 66). In the present context, we will focus on the first two functions. In such a case, the basis for the generation of meaning is the switch, on the basis of some internal structural principle, from one system of semiotic understanding of text to another (Lotman 2004c, 66). There is an exchange of the encoding language required for translation, which in its turn brings about a rearrangement of prior textual structures.

During the time period under discussion, several important shifts, seldom seen in earlier photographic practice, can be introduced: A) a forceful injection of verbal text as an internal structural element of photographic images. From the «June coup» of 1940 until the end of the Soviet period, there is nary a picture to be found of an assembly of the masses, of meetings or public speaking events that would be part of public discourse and would lack slogans and banners. Prior to great festive events, these — usually quotations and slogans from Marxist-Leninist ideology — were prescribed by the higher authorities and were published as «recommended» notices in major daily newspapers. Here we have a case of encoding that Lotman has called plural external recoding. In the case of plural external recoding the meaningful totality is built up through translating several independent structures into a mutual relation of equivalence. Verbal and visual text is translated into a total text.

Considering the novelty of such a symbiosis in representative practice, the quotation depicted in the photograph most likely functions similarly to Barthes's *punctum*, by which is meant a process of signification where one figure or detail present in the photograph draws attention to itself and begins to dominate the logic of the signification process, thereby excluding the equal participation of other elements in the process of signification (Barthes 1981). Or to apply the vocabulary of the theory of hegemony: a particular element performs the function of the *punctum*, establishing a chain of equivalence between other elements depicted in the photograph. Simultaneously, it will erase the mutual differences between the other elements (since they are all subordinated to a single element and will acquire their meaning through a relation with the *punctum*) and will dominate the entire totality of meaning depicted in the photograph.

Photo 2 depicts a mass of people, all carrying banners of Soviet ideology. The crowd consists of different individuals in their particularity, but it is precisely because of the banners that the group of people depicted in the photograph becomes «the people». The slogan «We demand that Soviet Estonia joins the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics» functions as the *punctum* or empty signifier, which, although it is a particular signifier (a single element among those depicted in the photograph), it nevertheless signifies, in the process of photographic signification, the «entire people», who are *constructed* out of the crowd of people *around* the idea presented in the banner. It is the slogan that is shared by all the different people in the photograph, other distinctions between them (e.g. differences in clothing, faces, etc.) lose their relevance.

Essentially similar are cases B) where the other text is another visual image (photo. 3). The best examples of this are the pictures of Soviet party leaders that were carried around during demonstrations. Here, signification converges around the party leaders. As an aside: the slogans permitted during the meetings, but especially the pictures of party leaders were themselves decipherable texts from which one could deduce the political priorities of the state, and the current hierarchy in the top ranks of the party (Lepik 2002).

Here I presented some hegemonic relationships of equivalence in visual representations that function as principles for constructing *external* relations between elements depicted in the photographs. On the other hand, we can also distinguish principles of organization in the process of signification that operate in a more concealed manner. One such principle is the code-text.

2.3. STRATEGIES FOR CONSTRUCTING «THE PEOPLE» IN PHOTOGRAPHY: CODE-TEXT

As noted above, in political discourse, a mythological logic of signification is prevalent in the process of signification. A culture with a mythological orientation is characterized by an appearance of an intermediary between language and text — the code-text (Lotman 2005b, 425). Whereas on the first level of analysis, the relationship of equivalence is constructed by external shared characteristics: a crowd of people is constructed into «the people» by their *common* work (people working in a factory, on the fields, voting at meetings (see photo 4), etc.), activities (parades, salutes to the party leaders standing on the tribune, people reading the

constitution together, etc.), clothing, the satisfied look on their faces, etc., where these *common* characteristics overshadow concrete differences between the members of «the people», then in case of code-texts the situation is more complicated. A code-text is not an abstract collection of rules required for constructing a text, but a syntagmatically constructed totality, an organized structure of signs that is not expressed directly, but is realized as variants in the lower level texts in the hierarchy of the culture (Lotman 2005b, 425). For an external observer, it may be both ambivalent and polyvalent, to be divided into a paradigm of equivalent yet different meanings, or again into a system of antonymic oppositions, but for the inhabitants of the culture «the code-text is nevertheless monolithic, compact and unambiguous [...] organizing their memories and defining the limits to the possible variations of the text» (Lotman 2005b, 426). Thus we can distinguish, during this time period, a codetext that defines the depiction of the relationship between those in power (usually a particular party leader) and the common people. Naturally enough, in public discourse this was presented as the unity of the party and «the people», but a unity with a strongly determined internal organization. These formal relations determined the manner by which the characters depicted in the photographs are related to one another, how they are related to the environment and other elements that comprise the picture — e.g. the placement of the characters with respect to the vertical division of the picture, the relations between speakers and listeners, the direction of the gaze, the active-passive relations of the subject derived from these, etc (photo 3).

The code-text is clearly revealed in various photographs that depict work. The activity of groups of people has been made so synchronous that «the picture-people are together like visual equations, mathematical formulae or sculptural ensembles» (Linnap 2000, 239). The hegemonic logic of the code-text is in operation in a more concealed manner than in previous coding strategies. By imposing specific mutual relationships between the positions of the subjects and the conditions for their depiction, it functions as a dominant process of signification, since it establishes some positions as active and others as passive, allows some positions to engage in relations with other elements in the picture and denies this to other positions, etc. (e.g. when decisions are made, Stalin always participates and is positioned hierarchically higher from «the people» in the vertical arrangement of the photograph, even if he is only present as a picture). It is impossible to imagine a photo published by the press that would depict a common man who has placed his hand familiarly on the shoulder of the Leader and talks, that is, teaches the Leader, who has taken up the position of the listener. Other «stars» from the higher ranks of the party besides Stalin may also take the position of the leader. Neither can we find a photograph of a voting where someone does not have his hand raised, etc.



PHOTO 1. THE «DEMONSTRATION OF THE FREE WILL OF THE FREE WORKERS OF ESTONIA» IS OBSERVED FROM THE BALCONY OF THE EMBASSY OF THE SOVIET UNION BY (LEFT TO RIGHT) NEEME RUUS, JOHANNES LAURISTIN, KARL SÄRE AND ANDREI ŽDANOV



PHOTO 2. THE PEOPLE DEMAND THAT ESTONIA BE ACCEPTED TO THE SOVIET UNION



PHOTO 3. PASSING THE DECISION TO JOIN THE SOVIET UNION

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